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ABSTRACT

There is an assumed relationship between a person's self-esteem, speech anxiety, and low cognitive complexity, but further research is needed for support of this premise. An important question to explore is how a child with speech anxiety (lack of confidence in communication situations) perceives others. Based on balance theory, the answer is that he sees others as a reliable source of information and, therefore, as a threat to his cognitive structure. A counselor for children with such anxieties will be better able to assist them if he has some insight into how others and the counselor himself are perceived by the clients. The difficulty for the counselor is that those with low self-esteem will tend to disbelieve any positive reinforcement they are given. The logical extension for the original premise would be to seek methods whereby an individual could learn to use a larger number of constructs in his interpersonal relationships in order to develop more ability to recognize resources in others. (RN)

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NEGATIVE SELF-IMAGE IN RELATION TO BALANCE THEORY

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NEGATIVE SELF-IMAGE IN RELATION TO BALANCE THEORY

Much of the literature on person perception is devoted to analysis of perception by a stable personality. A significant question this paper seeks to explore is, how does a person lacking speech confidence perceive others? The implications of such a question should be apparent. A counselor for persons with speech anxiety should be able to more effectively assist the client in overcoming his difficulty if the counselor can gain some insight into how an audience, others, and the counselor himself will be perceived by the client.

The term speech anxiety is not used here to refer to the ordinary tension felt by the average person when meeting a communication situation. Nor is the term used to refer to reasonable tension experienced by a person facing a situation entirely new to him. Speech anxiety is used here to refer to what society identifies as an unrealistic or unreasonable fear of communicating in a rather ordinary social situation.[1] Cases of fear judged by society to be unreasonable are identified as a mild form of psychoneurosis.[2] While such fear is judged as unreasonable by society, to the speech anxious person such fear is very real and the effects of this fear are also real.

In an earlier paper, Giffin and his associates, after testing the relationship between trust of others and self concept, concluded that "speech anxiety is not directly related to perceptions of others."[3] Instead, they concluded that "speech anxiety is a

problem fundamentally concerned with feelings of self-inadequacy rather than feelings of unreliability or incapability of other people." An important limitation of this conclusion is that the anxious person may trust the communications of others more than his own; thus, his own self-image may be heavily dependent on the perceived perceptions by others. In the language of Laing, Phillipson, and Lee, self-image is influenced by "how I perceive you perceiving me."[4] Empirical data is limited on the relationship between self-inadequacy and perceived perceptions by others but the theory of Mead and his followers suggest the two concepts are inextricably entwined.[5] Feelings of inadequacy thus may result from perceptions by others; in addition, such feelings may influence the way we perceive others perceiving us. These negative feelings also tend to influence behavior somewhat in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a child perceives his teacher as viewing him as a low achiever, he will tend to behave as a low achiever producing a fulfillment of the perceived expectation.

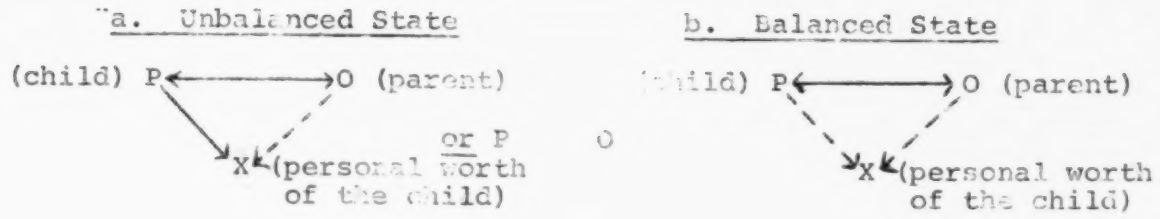
Studies of cognitive complexity by Crockett and Rosenbach have determined that younger children differentiate fewer qualities in others than older children. Given greater learning experience, additional dispositional qualities will be developed as a child discovers the inefficiency of his constructs.[6] Age and learning opportunities both fall within Werner's developmental theory which suggests that a person will develop from lack of differentiation to a point of high differentiation of qualities perceived in others unless growth is counter developmental.[7] Some people may not reach a high level of differentiated integration because

of some hindrance to normal growth or they may even regress in their ability as in the case of some form of brain damage due to a stroke, car wreck, etc.

Let us assume two cases. In the first case, a small child in his formative years,[8] is exposed to regularized negative reinforcement by his parents. In asking for a drink of water, he is told to go play outside. Family discussions exclude the child and attempts by the child to intervene are met with responses of "Go play in your room" or Shut up." Heider suggests similarity (member of the same family) and proximity (living in the same house) will result in a positive sentiment, liking. Furthermore, a person will tend to view the other person as homogeneous.[9] In the case of a child's view of his parent, the parent will not only be liked under certain situations, i.e., when the parent is in a good mood, but in all situations. This conclusion is further supported by the research previously noted which has determined that the younger person will develop few constructs in perceiving others.[10]

If the child has a positive sentiment toward his parents but perceives a negative sentiment from his parents toward his personal worth, then we can assume an unbalanced state. Theoretically we may divide the child's view of his personal worth and the love sentiment of the parent. Diagramatically the child's unbalanced self-concept could be viewed as in Fig. la. We would contend that the child will never perceive this unbalance because of the gradual regularized development of a balanced state in which the child perceives the parent loving him and disapproving of his personal worth. In return, the child loves the parent and feels low self-esteem as in Fig. lb.

Fig. 1



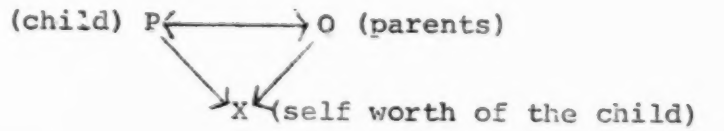
This conclusion is similar to the view of Giffin and Heider in their discussion of the relationship between speech and suppression.

> If a child's communication encounters negative feedback, negative feelings about himself are likely to follow. He evaluates his opinions by checking with others and finds his ideas negatively received. Continued attempts at self-expression, met by parental suppression, are likely to produce an undesirable self-concept.[11]

Low self-concept has been found to have a significant correlation with speech anxiety by Gilkinson,[12] Crowell, Katcher, and Miyamoto,[13] Borman and Shapiro,[14] and by Giffin and his associates.[15] Thus, a child may develop a lack of speech confidence as a result of perceptions of his personal worth gained from his parents' treatment of him.

Let us suppose a second case in which the child is positively reinforced by the parent but given limited exposure to outside influences. Examples of this could include the only child, an isolated family as on a farm, or an autocratic household in which tight control is maintained over the children. In this case the relationships may be all positive (Fig. 2).

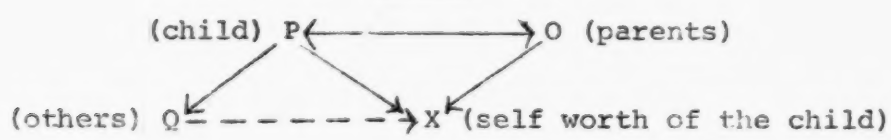
Fig. 2



Eventually the child is forced to leave the womb of the family and faces outside influences such as the students and teacher at school. Because the child has been exposed to few outside influences, he may have developed few constructs with a more limited capacity for integrating conflicting information. This line of reasoning is in accord with Werner's developmental theory which postulates that not everyone will reach the top level of development at any given age, if at all.[16] It is safe to assume that even among young children who are low in complexity, variation will occur based on learning opportunities.

Suppose our self-assured child is faced for the first time with negative reinforcement. For example, the other children make fun of his speech or perhaps upon volunteering to answer the teacher's questions he is regularly told he is incorrect. This situation may or may not happen in actuality; the significance rests with the child's perception of negative reinforcement. If the child perceives the teacher or students placing low evaluation on his personal worth, the child is faced with an unbalanced dilemma (Fig. 3). Somehow this unbalanced state must be resolved.

Fig. 3



Abelson offers four modes of resolution which could be adopted.[17] First, the child may deny the incongruent negative relationship. In this case, the child may withdraw from further interaction whenever possible (introversion), or he may become

belligerent and take on an "I'm right, you're wrong" attitude (extroversion). In either case, as Abelson notes, denial will result in a distortion of reality. The child will intentionally develop few constructs to deal with variant views and will simply deny the existence of information not within the realm of the constructs.

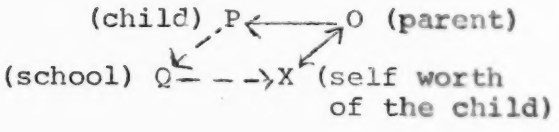
Literature on speech anxiety commonly identifies introversion to be correlated with lack of speech confidence. Low's biographical questionnaire found students experiencing "high stage fright" had participated in fewer high school extra-curricular activities, had their first date at a later age, and reported shyness and withdrawal significantly more than students with "low stage fright."[18] Less information is available regarding extroversion, perhaps due to the difficulty in identifying a student who lacks confidence in speaking but is aggressive in participation. However, most people can recall cases of insecure people who have tried to cover up their lack of confidence with aggressive interactions.

Aggressiveness as a form of denial is similar to the second mode of resolution suggested by Abelson. Bolstering refers to counterbalancing a variant relation with several desired relations. The child who experiences negative self-esteem in school may excel in athletics, or building model planes, etc. as a means of gaining favorable reinforcement to bolster the positive self-evaluation gained from the parents. Nevertheless, when faced with the situation of interacting with sources of potentially negavite information (an audience) the child will experience strong anxiety with a desire to avoid the situation.

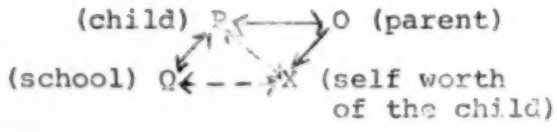
Third, the child may differentiate the source of the information. For example, "I am smart but I have a bad grade card because my teacher doesn't like me," or "I didn't try this semester, I don't like school," etc. At this point we are assuming that the parents have the greatest influence (Fig. 4a) because of the assumed desire of the child to maintain a positive self-image. Given strong enough influences, however, the child could change his personal evaluation and have a need to rationalize his parent's positive view of him (Fig. 4b).

Fig. 4

a.



b.



The fourth alternative is for the child to transcend the differences. "My parents understand me and if the teacher understood me she too would think highly of me," or "I know what I am talking about but I just can't express myself here like I can at home." In this case, the child is saying that given the opportunity he would receive a positive self-evaluation from others as he does from his parents.

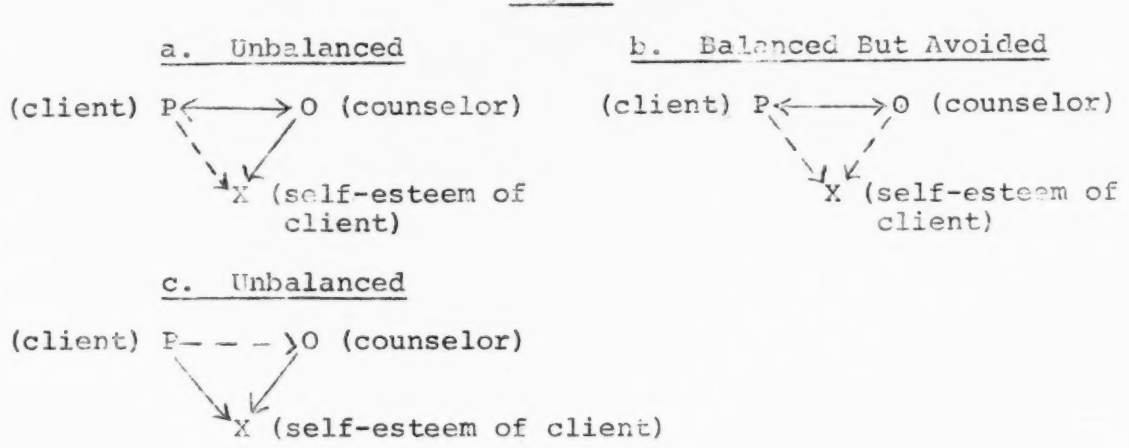
In each case of resolving imbalance, the child is operating with relatively few constructs to assure balance. The young child, of course, will normally use few constructs to account for differences. The consequence of either of the two previously cited cases, the child with negative self-esteem and the child with positive self-esteem, might be difficulty in facing situations

which will provide potentially negative reinforcement. The child with negative self-esteem will desire to avoid situations which he perceives will provide the inevitable negative reinforcement which he expects but finds unpleasant. The positive self-esteem child will desire to avoid the situation because of the "set" about evaluations from others which may be established in his mind.

The original question this paper sought to explore was, how does the speech anxiety person perceive others. The answer, based upon balance theory, is that, because he sees them as a reliable source of information about himself, he perceives them as a threat to his cognitive structure. The corollary question, how can a counselor help the person low in speech confidence, is deceivingly difficult to answer. The naive assumption would be to develop positive reinforcement in situations where the person would normally expect negative consequences. The limitation of this assumption is that the low self-esteem person will tend to disbelieve positive reinforcement. Research findings indicate that persons with low self-esteem tend to derogate the source of compliments and praise.[19] In fact, in such a situation a counselor is placed in somewhat of a bind. If he provides positive reinforcement, he is disbelieved (Fig. 5a), and if he provides negative reinforcement, he is believed but the person will seek to avoid further confirmation of this undesirable belief (Fig. 5b). For the negative self-esteemed person, reinforcement of either positive or negative nature will be met with the defensive modes of resolution. The person may respond to the positive reinforcement with "What's he trying to get from me?"

(Fig. 5c). Karen Horney has described this type of behavior as "going away" from others, ranging from mild alienation to suspicion, withdrawal, and fear.[20]

Fig. 5



Implicit throughout this paper has been the assumed relationship between self-esteem, speech anxiety, and low cognitive complexity. Empirical research is needed for support of this hypothesis. If a relationship is found, then the logical extension would be to devise methods whereby an individual could learn to use a larger number of constructs in his interpersonal relations. In each of the three client-counselor relationships diagrammed above, the client will probably have difficulty perceiving the counselor in a positive relationship. As Giffin and his associates have aptly stated, "the person in greatest need may not recognize available resources in others."[21] In other words, a person exhibiting high speech anxiety may be operating with low cognitive complexity. If he has only a few constructs available for perceiving others, he may be <u>unable</u> to recognize resources in others.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Kim Giffin and Mary Heider, An Experimental Program of Instruction in the Fundamentals of Speech for Students with a High Degree of Speech Anxiety, Research Report #35 (Lawrence, Kansas: The Communication Research Center, The University of Kansas, 1970), pp. 2-3.

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[4]Ronald D. Laing, H. Phillipson, and A. R. Lee, Interpersonal Perception, A Theory and a Method of Research (New York: Springer, 1966).

[5]George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society, edited by Charles Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[6]Walter H. Crockett, Allan H. Press, Melaine H. Scarlett, "Children's Descriptions of Peers: A Wernerian Developmental Analysis," Child Development, 1971, 42, pp. 439-454; and Davori Rosenbach, unpublished research study.

[7]Hans Werner, "The Concept of Development from a Comparative and Organismic Point of View," in Dale B. Harris (ed.), The Concept of Development (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), pp. 125-147.

[8]An individual's attitude toward himself and the world is fixed by one or two years of age and at least by age seven according to Eric Berne, Games People Play (New York: Grove Press, 1964); Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (2nd ed.) (New York: Norton, 1963); Gordon Allport, Becoming (New York: Yale University Press, 1964).

[9]Fritz Heider, The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1958), pp. 182-188.

[10]Walter Crockett and Rosenbach, op. cit.

[11]Kim Giffin and Mary Heider, "The Relationship Between Speech Anxiety and the Suppression of Communication in Childhood," The Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement, part 2, 1967, p. 5.

[12]Howard Gilkinson, "A Questionnarie Study of the Causes of Social Fears Among College Speech Students," Speech Monographs, 10, 1943, pp. 74-83.

[13]Laura Crowell, Allan Katcher, and S. Frank Miyamoto, "Self-Concepts of Communication Skill and Performance in Small Group Discussions," Speech Monographs, 22, 1955, pp. 20-27.

[14]Ernest Bormann and George Shapiro, "Perceived Confidence as a Function of Self-Image," Central States Speech Journal, 13, 1962, pp. 253-256.

[15]Giffin, Heider, Groginsky, and Drake, op. cit., p. 25.

[16]Werner, op. cit.

[17]Robert P. Abelson, "Modes of Resolution of Belief Dilemmas," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 3, 1959, pp. 343-352.

[18]Gordon M. Low, "The Relationship of Psychometric Factors to Stage Fright," (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Utah, 1950).

[19]See Morton Deutsch and L. Solomon, "Reactions to Evaluations by Others as Influenced by Self-Evaluation," Sociometry, 22, 1959, pp. 93-112; also see J. W. Thibaut and H. W. Riecken, "Some Determinants and Consequences of the Perception of Social Causality," Journal of Personality, 24, 1955, pp. 113-133.

[20]Karen Horney, Our Inner Conflicts (New York: Norton, 1945) p. 65.

[21]Giffin, Heider, Groginski, and Drake, op. cit., p. 25.